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SUBJECT: CORRUPTION IN EDUCATION - BLESSING FOR SOME, CURSE FOR OTHERS?

REF: A) ASHGABAT 857  
B) ASHGABAT 808

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Corruption in higher education is pervasive and comes at a high cost to the integrity of the educational system, as well as a high cost to parents who are forced to borrow huge sums from family and friends in order for their children to pursue schooling. Every year, during the admissions cycle, the government identifies one or more officials as scapegoats to show that it is serious about combating this problem, which Post estimates generates a minimum of \$100 million USD yearly. With the firing of the Minister of Education on July 3, this year is no exception. Creating more university slots for graduating seniors, paying education professionals a livable wage, and creating a transparent admission process would resolve this problem. Unfortunately, officials at the highest levels are complicit in corruption, and no real reform is foreseeable because no one with the will, influence, and skills necessary to bring about change is dedicated to making this happen. END SUMMARY.

SUPERFICIAL CHANGES WITH NO REAL CONTENT

¶3. (SBU) After Berdimuhamedov came into power, certain changes were introduced in education such as extending the length of study at the secondary school and university levels, decreasing secondary school instructor workloads from 36 hours per week to 24 hours, increasing teacher salaries and vacation time, and re-establishment of graduate programs. In addition, a lot of focus has been put on building infrastructure and bringing in computers and multimedia learning technology to newly-built schools. But no attention is given to teacher training and curriculum reform, which comprise the content of education and are factors that will result in real change and ultimate success. None of the people in charge of education are capable of instituting these reforms. It appears that there is no intention or desire to do it from the top as well.

¶4. (SBU) In addition to the damage wrought by the Niyazov regime and continued by the current regime, another serious issue continues to dominate the education process in Turkmenistan at all levels. President Berdimuhamedov fired several education officials on July

3, including Minister of Education Muhammetgeldy Annaamanov and several rectors, in connection with bribery in the admissions process (Ref. A). Following the firing of the rector of the Azadi World Language Institute, a professor and dean from the Institute said on television that they willingly participated in a ring led by Institute Rector Ayna Kurbanniyazova, which collected \$119,000 USD from eight applicants in summer of 2009.

**¶15.** (SBU) This particular case is one of many thousands that have taken and will continue to take place in Turkmenistan. However, bribe amounts and the extent of bribery in education has steeply increased and indications show that this trend will continue. During Cabinet of Ministers meetings, Berdimuhamedov as well as Niyazov officially cited educational corruption as the reason for many dismissals of education officials. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan has not made substantial efforts to stamp out this problem. This issue is a subject of concern for many layers of the population and everyone openly talks about the amounts needed to procure a spot for one's child in school -- and the extent of it. Meanwhile, the government and law enforcement bodies pretend to be unaware.

**¶16.** (SBU) Bribery continues as the main criteria for securing admission to higher educational institutions in Turkmenistan. Securing admission on the basis of merit for one's child at an institution of higher learning, as well as at primary and secondary schools with decent reputations, is practically impossible. In addition, paying for good grades is a common practice at both schools and universities. The limited number of admission slots at Turkmen universities creates an atmosphere in which parents are prepared to pay bribes in order to obtain spots for their children in university. In addition, officials and instructors commonly fall

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into bribe-taking as a means to supplement their low salaries. The government continues to turn a blind eye to this open secret and pretends to fight it by regularly dismissing top officials.

#### LACK OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES CREATES HUGE COMPETITION

**¶17.** (SBU) During the Soviet period, Turkmenistan had over 20,000 places available to first-year university students, but after independence in 1992 university admission slots gradually decreased to fewer than 3,000 per 105,000 high school graduates annually. Beginning in 2007, this number rose by 30 percent to 3,900, which barely scratched the surface of creating the number of university spots needed for Turkmenistan's young people. Deputy Chairman for Education, Health, Science, and Religion Hydyr Saparlyev announced at the recent July 3 meeting that 4,275 university slots, 1,698 slots at vocational three-year colleges, and 2,700 slots in study abroad programs would be made available to first-year students. However, this increase still does not address the need to create enough educational opportunities for Turkmenistan's youth. The still sharp reduction in places available for first-year students has resulted in an educational system in which less than four percent of high school graduates can attend university, and competition among applicants has increased to the point that only the wealthiest or best-connected applicants can gain access.

#### MILLIONS INVOLVED IN SHADY BUSINESS OF EDUCATIONAL CORRUPTION

**¶17.** (SBU) Apart from the occasional firing or reprimand for "shortcomings," government officials continue to ignore educational corruption because of the large supplementary income they receive from this side business. According to common local knowledge, the minimal bribe for university admission is \$15,000 USD. For vocational college admission, the minimum bribe is \$5,000 USD. (NOTE: These figures grow in relation to the prestige of the university or college, as well as the specialization the student is applying for. The English Department at Azadi World Languages Institute and Turkmen State University are very desirable. The Oil and Gas Department at the Polytechnic Institute is also prestigious. Foreign languages, law, and international relations, economy, and business are also elite majors. END NOTE.) During this year's admission cycle, the overall minimum amount that parents will pay in bribes to Cabinet of Ministers officials, Ministry of Education officials, and rectors will equal about \$100 million USD. Taking

into account that bribes can rise as high as \$80,000-100,000 or more per student, this is a minimum figure.

#### COLLUSION FROM THE TOP DOWN

¶8. (SBU) Turkmenistan's opaque higher education admissions system plays a part in creating an atmosphere ripe for corruption. According to a Presidential Decree of 2002, the Central Admission Committee headed by the Deputy Chairman for Education, Health, Science, and Religion and including representatives of the Academy of Science, the Minister of Education, and the rectors of all universities regulate all stages of the admissions process for Turkmenistan's universities. The Central Admissions Committee authorizes each university to select its own admissions committee -- which the Ministry of Education approves -- to collect applications and conduct tests and interviews, including an oral examination on the Ruhnama, history of Turkmenistan, and the subject the applicant hopes to study. The results of these oral exams, administered in Turkmen, are confidential -- and are not taped, leaving no proof of student performance. The admissions committees also conduct interviews and entrance exams in the regions. The maximum age for university applicants is 35, although preference is given to younger candidates. Admissions committees consist of teachers and department heads, a vice-rector of each university, as well as representatives of the Ministry of Education's Higher Education Department and of the Academy of Science. The nontransparent structure and lack of independent oversight of the admissions system, as well as the inclusion of top officials from the Deputy Chairman down, clearly confirms the magnitude and the complicity of officials involved in this process.

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¶9. (SBU) There is little security in this bribe system for parties on either side, both parents and administrators. Often securing a place for one's child involves so many intermediaries that the whole plan for a student's admission can fall apart if one intermediary in the chain cannot deliver what he or she promised. The government can decide to make administrators public scapegoats, which can involve extended jail time. This system has doubtless discouraged many students from attempting to continue studies after high school. A higher bidder can outbribe a fellow student, and cause a loss of hundreds to thousands of dollars that educational officials will not repay -- and again leaves the student without a place at university. Parents are left with no other choice than to borrow money from many family members and close friends, which they pay back over many years, creating a vicious circle that is economically inefficient, humiliating and destructive.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Russia created alternative educational opportunities for their talented and bright youth to obtain education abroad through government scholarship programs. In addition, these countries significantly invested in education and science. However, Turkmenistan continues to spend the state budget allocation for education almost exclusively on infrastructure. No real reform is foreseeable due to the lack of transparency in educational admissions and a lack of administrators with the will, influence, and skills necessary to bring about change, as well as the lack of serious commitment on the part of the government to change social attitudes toward educational corruption. Finally, university officials are loathe to surrender this income-generating opportunity without an adequate increase in livable wages. This situation is worsening, and will become more difficult to turn around as time goes on. END COMMENT.

MILES